

“THEIR OWN MERIT”: OPERATION VARSITY BLUES AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO
IMAGE REPAIR DISCOURSE AND THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS IN THE
UNITED STATES

A Thesis

Presented to the Honors Program of
Angelo State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Highest University Honors
BACHELOR OF ARTS

by

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May 2021

Major: Communication and Political Science

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Dr. Rodriguez, for directing my thesis and chairing my committee. I will be forever grateful for your time, energy, advice, guidance, and encouragement. Your expertise and edits made this thesis into an excellent and rewarding endeavor. Thank you for teaching me how to love research. Thank you for pushing me, in all the right ways and at all the right moments.

Thank you, Dr. Eoff, for overseeing my thesis course and for guiding my Honors experience. I relied on your knowledge to know how to approach this process and how to travel on this journey. You are the first professor who taught me what real research is. Thank you for always listening and always leading.

Thank you, Dr. Brojakowski and Dr. Bartl, for sitting on my committee and giving your input during the process. I needed your insight, experience, and professionalism. Thank you for making this thesis worth the collective effort.

Thank you, Dr. Howard and the faculty of the Communication and Mass Media Department. You gave me an undergraduate experience better than I could have ever hoped for.

Thank you, my fellow thesis students, for long nights of working and writing. Your support and friendship kept me going in many ways this semester.

Thank you, my family, for your love and support. You were always there when I needed you. You became the safety net underneath my tightrope. Thank you for helping me to dream big.

ABSTRACT

In March 2019, federal officials announced charges (CNN, 2019) in the “largest college admissions scam ever prosecuted by the Department of Justice” (NBC 6 South Florida, 2019). Authorities dubbed this effort *Operation Varsity Blues* (Lens, 2021). Certain individuals stepped forward to apologize for their roles in the scandal. *Operation Varsity Blues* created an opportunity for new research to add to extant image repair literature and to study the event’s broader impact. The researcher (1) used publicly available texts of individuals’ apologies and analyzed these texts through the lens of Benoit’s (1997) Image Repair Theory, (2) compared the strategies used in the apologies and evaluated the strategies’ effectiveness, and (3) studied *Operation Varsity Blue*’s impact on the college admissions process in the United States. The researcher ultimately concluded that, generally, the individuals’ image repair efforts were successful and that the scandal did not create meaningful change in the college admissions process.

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INTRODUCTION

On March 12, 2019, federal authorities announced charges (CNN, 2019) in what they deemed “the largest college admissions scam ever prosecuted by the Department of Justice” (NBC 6 South Florida, 2019). These authorities, including a U.S. Attorney from the District of Massachusetts and the Special Agent in Charge from the FBI’s Boston field office, described a sweeping investigation that involved millions of dollars, hundreds of special agents, and well-known celebrities (CNN, 2019). Authorities dubbed this massive effort *Operation Varsity Blues* (Lens, 2021). In the end, investigative efforts revealed that more than 50 parents, test administrators, and coaches participated in the scandal (Pascus, 2019). The related indictments exposed two primary schemes: standardized test cheating and college acceptance bribery. The first scheme, standardized test cheating, implicated the operations of William Singer. Singer, who operated *The Key* and *The Key World Foundation*, served as a confidential witness and pled guilty to racketeering conspiracy and money laundering charges. In this part of the scandal, SAT and ACT exam administrators accepted bribes in exchange for allowing test takers, typically an individual named Mark Riddell (a private-school counselor), to take the exams for students or to correct answers after the students took the exams (United States Attorney’s Office District of Massachusetts, 2019). Riddell agreed to plead guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and money laundering (Pascus, 2019). Parents funneled money to Singer through purported donations to the *Key Worldwide Foundation* (United States Attorney’s Office District of Massachusetts, 2019). The second scheme involved bribing coaches and administrators to allow students to enter elite

universities under the false pretense of the students being athletic recruits (United States Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, 2019). Both schemes involved the parents of students, as well (Pascus, 2019). For example, one couple, Gregory and Marcia Abbott, paid \$125,000 to Singer (Li, 2019) in exchange for an individual correcting their daughter's answers to the ACT exam and two SAT subject tests (Levenson & Vitagliano, 2019). Similarly, another individual, Jane Buckingham, a Beverly Hills marketer and writer, paid \$50,000 for a college proctor to take the ACT on behalf of her son (Sheehy, 2021). Of the individuals facing allegations, several were accused of participating in multiple aspects of the college admissions schemes. For example, accusations against Agustin Huneus Jr. included bribing University of Southern California (USC) senior associate athletic director Donna Heinel and USC water polo coach Jovan Vavic, despite the fact that Huneus's daughter did not actually play water polo (Woodrow, 2019), as well as paying \$50,000 to *Key Worldwide Foundation* (Pascus, 2019). *Operation Varsity Blues* gained national attention not only because of the magnitude and wide reach of the schemes, but also because the scandal implicated prominent celebrities.

Well-known personalities like Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin became embroiled in the controversy. Huffman was accused of paying *Key Worldwide Foundation* to participate in the scheme, which may have been the reason for her daughter scoring 400 points higher on her SAT than her PSAT (Pascus, 2019). Prosecutors claimed that Loughlin, along with her husband, paid \$500,000 in bribes to Singer to have her two daughters designated as recruits for USC's crew team although neither of her daughters rowed (Gross, 2020).

Many of the parents implicated by the indictments pled guilty, including Huffman (Pascus, 2019). Huffman received a sentence of 14 days in prison, a \$30,000 fine, 250 hours

of community service, and one year of supervised release (United States Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, 2021). However, the federal prison released her after only 12 days, due to a policy that allows inmates who are scheduled for weekend release to be let out on Friday. Loughlin, who also pled guilty, served two months in prison and was directed to additionally serve two years of supervised release, pay a fine of \$150,000, and perform 100 hours of service in the community (Levenson & Mossburg, 2020).

The revelations from the *Operation Varsity Blues* investigation resulted in massive public backlash. The scandal prompted a discussion of review and reform within the realm of college admissions. Additionally, certain individuals involved in the schemes chose to use their time in the spotlight of national attention to deliver written or oral apologies to express their regret for participating in the scam in hopes of repairing their image. As such, the purpose of this research is twofold. First, the researcher seeks to determine whether certain apology types resulted in similar or different consequences and public response. Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory provides a framework to explore this question. Second, the researcher seeks to determine whether *Operation Varsity Blues* altered the college admissions process in a meaningful and substantial manner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Apologia, self-defense speech that is prompted by an attack on an individual's character, involves the efforts of an individual to rebut a derogatory charge through self-presentation of a favorable view of the individual's character (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019). Scholars use apologia as a framework for analysis within crisis communication research. One of the ways that researchers can look at apologia is through the lens of image repair.

Image Repair Theory

In 1997, Benoit published a discourse on image repair and crisis communication. Benoit later renamed his theory Image Repair Theory, from the earlier signifier "Image Restoration Theory," due to his conclusion that images may only be repaired and never fully restored. He designed Image Repair Theory to assist practitioners in developing an appropriate communicative response during a crisis situation. However, alternatively, the theory also guides educators and scholars as they analyze communication produced during a crisis situation.

Benoit (1997) founded his theory on the concept of *image*. *Image* applies to everyone—organizations, non-profits, for-profits, governments, and individuals. The importance of *image* makes Image Repair Theory a necessary tool for any group or individual wishing to remain in the public eye today. The employing of practical, workable strategies in an ever-speeding-up world of information is a necessity. Indeed, as Benoit (1997) asserted, the idea of image dominates the field of public relations and creates two ways of looking at an image: looking forward and looking back. Benoit referred to these approaches as preventive and restorative.

Benoit (1997) specifically pointed out the differences in groups and individuals. He noted that configurations, magnitude, and resources all lead to the possibility of different institutions enacting image repair efforts differently. This process can be labeled as an *interactive* theory, one that a practitioner can manipulate, maneuver, and apply as needed for a given situation.

Benoit's (1997) theory explained that attempts to restore an image originate as a response to an attack. These attacks must contain two components: (1) the accused maintains responsibility for an action; (2) the act remains offensive. In determining and observing these components, perception becomes more important than reality. If such conditions exist in a scenario, the accused may attempt to perform image restoration through any one of five approaches or through multiple approaches. Of importance to note, although five approaches exist, these broad categories contain a total of 14 strategies, as noted below.

The first approach noted by Benoit (1997), *denial*, occurs when the accused chooses to directly contradict the original claim. *Denial* may involve both subtle and obvious tactics. For instance, the accused may engage in *simple denial*, claiming that they did not perform the act, or they instead may choose to *shift the blame* to a third entity, claiming that another performed the act. By attempting to deny responsibility, the accused attempts to evade the consequences that may arise from association with the original action.

A second approach introduced in Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997) is *evasion of responsibility*. This strategy takes the form of four iterations. Evasion strategies may include: (1) claiming that the alleged action remained appropriate or reasonable (i.e., *provocation*), (2) claiming that a lack of information excuses the offense (i.e., *defeasibility*), (3) claiming that the action happened accidentally (i.e., *accident*), and/or (4) claiming that good intentions

make the action non-offensive (i.e., *good intentions*). Again, by *evading responsibility*, the accused attempts to avoid any penalties generally associated with performing the alleged offense.

The third strategy, *reduction of offensiveness*, may involve any of six forms, which are designed to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the original action (Benoit, 1997). The accused may: (1) attempt to strengthen others' positive feelings about the perpetrator (i.e., *bolstering*), (2) attempt to minimize others' negative feelings about the action (i.e., *minimization*), (3) attempt to distinguish the action from other more-offensive actions (i.e., *differentiation*), (4) attempt to contextualize the action or argue that more important considerations exist (i.e., *transcendence*), (5) attempt to reduce the credibility of the accuser (i.e., *attack accuser*), and/or (6) attempt to reimburse the victim for the action (i.e., *compensation*). This approach employs tactics designed to mitigate and alter the situation at hand.

In the fourth approach, *corrective action*, the accused literally takes action to correct the situation and, in so doing, issues a commitment to correct the problem (Benoit, 1997). As opposed to the first three strategies that Benoit discussed, *corrective action* exists more as a compliant response than a defiant response. The accused allows itself to remain associated with the original accusations, insuring to highlight their corrective action in hopes of exhibiting care for the safety and well-being of their stakeholders.

Finally, the fifth strategy, *mortification*, involves a seemingly more-obviously emotional element than the earlier strategies. The accused who desires to perform *mortification* will confess and ask for forgiveness. Benoit noted, however, that this strategy

involves the natural consequence of potentially leaving the accused open to lawsuits; therefore, this strategy should be used cautiously.

The five approaches introduced through the typology of Image Repair Theory give researchers the ability to study the effectiveness of different rhetorical artifacts that fall within the bounds of apologia. Benoit (1997) applied his theory to a broad range of cases, including analysis of Pepsi, AT&T, and Sears. Previous, extant literature follows Benoit's example and exhibits the use of Benoit's typology to explore various apologies in the areas of sports (Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick, & Thompson, 2020; Armfield, McGuire, Hoffman, Shin, Eckhart, Acquah-Baidoo, & Diaz, 2019; Hanna & Morton, 2020), higher education (Frederick, Pegoraro, & Smith, 2021; Riggs, 2019), public relations (Lauzen, 2016), politics/government (Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009; Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019), and social media/celebrities (Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015; Moody, 2011).

Image Repair Theory in Research

Scholars have traditionally used Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory in contexts ranging from sports to politics, and every field in between, to evaluate the strategies used by performers of apologia in crisis communication situations. Many of these scholars, even those analyzing widely differing crises from a multitude of academic disciplines, observed similar results. These results centered around (1) which image repair strategies seem to work the best and (2) why those strategies remain particularly successful in causing third parties (such as media or social media users) to understand the issues in accordance with how the individual wants to frame the issues.

Image Repair in Sports

In the context of sports, scholars have applied Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory to organizations such as universities, professional athletes, and professional sports organizations. Three works of analysis particularly stand out in this category.

First, Hanna and Morton (2020) used Image Repair Theory to analyze statements made by football coach Urban Meyer and others in the midst of a communication crisis at Ohio State University. A key moment in the development of the crisis remained the questioning of Meyer about the conduct of assistant football coach Zach Smith. This questioning led to the revelation that Meyer knew about domestic violence allegations from 2009 against Smith (lodged by Smith's wife Courtney Smith), yet Meyer hired Smith to work with him at a new university in 2012. Additionally, of importance to note, despite the communication crisis developing at Ohio State, Meyer gave the impression that he did not know about new allegations from 2015. A report about the situation was released and a press conference was held. It was announced that Meyer would be suspended for three games. After serving his suspension, Meyer returned to "business as usual" at the university, which led to backlash. Hanna and Morton (2020) found that early on in Meyer's response to his image crisis, Meyer leaned particularly on *denial* techniques and *evasion of responsibility*. As time went on, however, he moved more towards strategies of *reducing offensiveness* and *mortification*. Hanna and Morton (2020) noted that Meyer's self-presentation (i.e. appearing dishonest, uncomfortable, and insincere) prompted harsh criticism from the media. This finding remained consistent with one of Hanna and Morton's (2020) references, Benoit and Drew (1997), who explained that *mortification* and *corrective action* exist as the most

appropriate and most effective methods of image repair. Meyer, clearly, failed to succeed in regards to these methods.

Additionally, Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick, and Thompson (2020) addressed the lack of research on image repair among women athletes by analyzing Abby Wambach's DUI incident and Maria Sharapova's admission of a failed drug test. The researchers acknowledge the positioning of Benoit's Image Repair Theory as the primary theoretical tool used for conceptualizing which strategies athletes use to attempt to repair their reputations. In looking at Wambach's and Sharapova's Facebook posts related to their offenses, the researchers examined the image repair strategies the female athletes used and the user responses to those strategies. Wambach's statement relied heavily on *mortification* and *corrective action*. The responses of Facebook users to Wambach's statement congregated around four salient themes: "a mistake," "focus of attention" (i.e. shifting the focus of the attention towards others and away from Wambach), "nature of transgression," and "respect." By contrast, Sharapova's statement used *evading responsibility* (i.e. making an excuse and defeasibility) and *reducing offensiveness* (i.e. attacking the accuser). Facebook users' responses centered around themes of "drug" (i.e. the nature of the drug; was it legitimate or illicit?), "support and admiration," "honesty" (of interest to note, many sided with her and a small number sided against her), "placing blame" (i.e. discussing who remained responsible for the positive drug test), and "Maria" (a category, generally, of showing love and support). The researchers found that in both Wambach's and Sharapova's cases, despite their use of vastly different image repair strategies, Facebook users overwhelmingly showed support for both players. The researchers theorized that perhaps this was because (1) the players had previously unblemished professional reputations, (2) no one was physically or socially harmed by the

actions of the players, and/or (3) perhaps individuals who liked the players interacted with them on Facebook. The researchers noted that the timing of the statements seemed to have little impact on their reception. This research posited that in order for image repair attempts to be successful, the image repair work must appear credible and convincing to the audience. In other words, in contrast to the conclusions of Hanna and Morton (2020), the success of image repair attempts seems to depend more on believability than strategy. These researchers also contributed the observation that social media remains a valuable venue for image repair work because it allows for public visibility for supportive messages (Allison et al., 2020).

Similarly, Armfield, McGuire, Hoffman, Shin, Eckhart, Acquah-Baidoo, and Diaz (2019) used Benoit's Image Repair Theory to analyze how New England Patriots' head coach Bill Belichick and owner Robert Kraft responded to allegations that their organization, or at least one person in their organization, had tampered with the pressure of footballs in the American Football Conference title game before Super Bowl XLIX. In this game, New England routed Indianapolis by almost 40 points. The Patriots' organization was already coming off of a crisis communication situation. In 2007, the Patriots were penalized by the National Football League (NFL) for videotaping the defensive signals used by another team. After these new allegations of nefarious conduct arose, Belichick and starting quarterback Tom Brady held a press conference in January 2015. After this press conference, several analysts publicly questioned the two men's honesty; additionally, two retired players challenged Brady's veracity. Belichick again talked with reporters at a later point in time. However, he and Brady later sidestepped questions. Kraft, in an interview session, defended his organization. The investigation continued. While the NFL eventually absolved Patriots' executives of wrongdoing, it did hand out penalties to other members of the organization.

The Patriots engaged in image repair with the intention of rehabilitating their reputation within the NFL and with the NFL's fans. Strategies that Belichick utilized included: *corrective actions*, *denial*, *defeasibility* (an avoidance technique), *reduction of offensiveness*, *blame shifting* (a form of *denial*), and *transcendence* (avoiding talking about the matter). By contrast, Kraft became the aggressor and *attacked accusers*. The researchers noted a lack of *mortification* expressed by either individual. In terms of the success of the image repair strategies, at least in the short term, success seemed to elude the Patriots. Public opinion sat at a 30% favorability rating (the lowest of all NFL teams prior to Super Bowl XLIX, partially because of the Patriots' past history with another recent scandal). Additionally, Belichick received a 41% unfavorable rating among NFL fans, and 63% of avid NFL fans believed that the Patriots, in fact, cheated.

Based on the literature presented, researchers who used Image Repair Theory to analyze crisis communication situations related to sports found that while *mortification* and *corrective action* generally represent the most important and most effective repair strategies, the believability of the practitioner plays a significant role in the ultimate efficacy of the image repair attempts. Further image repair research in the area of public relations corroborates these findings.

Image Repair in Public Relations

Public relations serves as an additional area in which scholars apply Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory for the purpose of crisis communication analysis. Lauzen (2016) used Image Repair Theory to analyze the Cannes Film Festival's artistic director Thierry Frémaux's responses to accusations of sexism related to the Festival's film selection process. More than one feminist group generated criticism pertaining to an under-representation of

films directed by women in a prestigious competition. Lauzen (2016) found that Frémaux used *denial*, *blame shifting*, *reduction of offensiveness*, *bolstering*, *differentiating*, and *transcendence* in his responses. Of great importance to note, Lauzen's analysis did not locate any instances of *mortification* or *corrective action*. Lauzen asserted that perhaps Frémaux wanted to play to a perceived main audience of male directors and film executives. However, Frémaux's efforts to repair his image appear to have largely remained ineffective in shifting perceptions. This finding remained consistent with the findings of other scholars who have applied Benoit's theory to crisis communication situations in other sectors, such as in politics and government.

Image Repair in Politics and Government

Scholars have also applied Image Repair Theory to crisis communication situations related to politics and government. Sarfo-Kantankah (2019) used concepts of apologia and image repair to look at the strategies used by the former president of Ghana to maintain his reputation after losing in the 2016 general elections. President Mahama tried to defend himself and assert that he did not bear the responsibility for the National Democratic Congress's (NDC's) loss in 2016; he attempted to repair his image. Mahama used strategies like *bolstering* and *attacking*. In one instance of *bolstering*, he attempted to explain the necessity of "Unity Walks" to ensure solidarity, raise morale, and raise awareness for the reorganization taking place. In a different instance of *attacking*, he accused the opposition, the New Patriot Party (NPP), of propaganda and lying. These attacks attempted to *shift the blame* off of Mahama and contend that losing was not *his* fault. Ultimately, the researcher found that Mahama did not accept responsibility (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019).

In another instance of research connected to crisis communication in the political and government arenas, Peijuan, Ting, and Pang (2009) used Image Repair Theory to analyze the strategies used during a “Made in China” crisis communication situation. In 2007, a series of product recalls challenged China’s reputation as “the workshop of the world.” Arguably, for the first time, allegations of product deficiencies targeted a country. Peijuan et al. (2009) not only analyzed the strategies used during this crisis, but also examined the image of China that these strategies generated. The researchers found that *denial* remained a commonly observed image repair strategy used by China. The country attempted to deflect criticisms, such as claiming that their product did not cause a series of pet deaths, and also combined *denial* with *bolstering*, such as claiming that the customers’ misuse of tires remained at fault for the issue (instead of the quality of the tires).

Over time, China used *corrective action*, such as stating that in response to an accusation of contaminated toothpaste, long-term use of the toothpaste was not harmful, but an investigation would take place. The researchers concluded that initial defensive strategies remained ineffective, which created an image of a hurried and harried country. However, after China confronted the crisis through *corrective action*, a steadier image of the country emerged. Ultimately, China could not sustain the use of *denial*, *bolstering*, and *attacking* because of mounting evidence that pushed China towards *corrective action*.

Image repair research in political and government contexts emphasizes similar findings as related research in sports and public relations contexts. *Corrective action* and acknowledgement of responsibility (which is similar to *mortification*) remain essential to the success of image repair attempts. Much like in the arenas of politics and government, image

repair has also been used in crisis communication to analyze scandals and controversy surrounding social media and celebrities.

Image Repair in Social Media and Celebrity Research

Scholars have also applied Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory to analysis of crisis communication scenarios involving social media and celebrities. Moody (2011) compared and contrasted the crisis management strategies used by Jon and Kate Gosselin during their highly-public, 2009 divorce. Moody (2011) looked at personal statements, interviews, and social media from the year before and the year after their divorce. In the beginning, media framed Kate as a distraught wife and framed Jon as an untrustworthy husband. Later, however, media moved to positively portraying Jon and negatively portraying Kate. Moody (2011) concluded that, while social media allow celebrities to bypass gatekeeping and relay information quickly and efficiently to the public, celebrities in such situations must still follow traditional image repair strategies in order to achieve success. Moody (2011) noted the different strategies employed by Jon and Kate at different points along the timeline. In phase one of the divorce, Kate mostly used *evasion of responsibility*, *attacking the accuser*, and *reducing offensiveness*. However, in phase two, she changed her public image to appear optimistic and glamorous. This image made it look like Kate recovered too quickly from the divorce. She attempted to use a strategy of *reduction of offensiveness*, but Moody (2011) noted that her attempts were possibly too little, too late. In phase one of the divorce, Jon used *evasion of responsibility*, *blame shifting*, and *bolstering*, attempting to steal credibility from his accusers, in a sense. However, his image repair attempts might have been more successful if he had apologized right away. He employed *denial* in both phase one and phase two, which remained largely unsuccessful; media publicized his quick move to date several women after

the divorce announcement. In phase two of the divorce, Jon eventually apologized, but he also again *attacked* his accuser (less prominently though, than in phase one).

Ultimately, the researcher concluded that five seasons of the couple's TV show contributed to viewers' negative perception of Kate. Jon remained less successful in phase one, but Kate remained less successful in phase two. The researcher argued that media outlets tend towards lower levels of sympathy when celebrities act outside of accordance with societal norms for their situation (Moody, 2011).

Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, and Perry (2015) also saw low levels of sympathy when they analyzed Paula Deen's attempt to repair her image after admitting to using a racial slur. The necessity for crisis communication arose after the filing of a discrimination lawsuit that largely focused on accusations against Deen's brother and male employees related to harassment, abuse, and a hostile work environment. *National Enquirer* ran a story claiming to have obtained a legal deposition in which Deen admitted to using the 'N-word' and wanting Black waiters to play slave roles at her brother's wedding party. In response, her lawyer released a statement stating, "Ms. Deen does not condone or find the use of racial epithets acceptable" (Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015, p. 149). A series of apology videos, uploaded and/or then removed (depending on the instance), featured Deen but appeared to contradict each other in terms of strategy. Audience members wondered why Deen spent time on the videos instead of focusing on changing herself. Ultimately, Len-Ríos et al. (2015) concluded that Deen's image repair tactics remained unsuccessful because her apology did not focus on the allegations and because her other tactics (*bolstering*, *minimization*, and *mortification*) contradicted each other.

Crisis communication research related to social media and celebrities again confirmed that an absence of *mortification* and *corrective action* seems to correlate with a lack of success in terms of practitioner's image repair efforts and that believability remains essential. A perceived lack of credibility may even negate the effects of practicing *mortification*. Image repair research in higher education further emphasizes these conclusions.

Image Repair in Higher Education

In the context of higher education, scholars have applied Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory to analyzing universities and their responses in crisis communication situations. Riggs (2019) used Image Repair Theory to analyze a letter from Baylor University's interim president regarding a Title IX crisis situation. The situation reached a feverish pitch after Baylor published "Findings of Fact" online—a document written as a result of a presentation by Pepper Hamilton LLP law firm. This law firm spent one academic year looking at documentation and conducting interviews. The broader Baylor community displayed concern for lack of administrative support for issues related to Title IX and supervision of athletic staff. In the end, these "Findings of Fact" implicated both administration and coaching staff for their failure to implement university policies in compliance with Title IX. Problematic behaviors included: discouraging complainants from reporting, accommodating, or contributing to a hostile environment, and handling conduct issues without following university protocol. Interim President Joseph Garland issued a letter, the importance of which related to the fact that many stakeholders did not know him but did understand the uncertainty of the university's predicament. Riggs (2019) found that the letter relied heavily on *corrective action*, *mortification*, and *reduction of offensiveness*. Garland's credibility among stakeholders stood out. From the perspective of evaluating

success, the university's enrollment numbers before, during, and after the crisis did not reflect the crisis. In fact, while the crisis caused Baylor football recruits to ask for release from their letters of intent to play, the games actually remained well-attended. Riggs (2019) found that Garland helped guide stakeholders' attitudes toward an understanding of positive outcomes and organizational learning.

Similarly, in this category of higher education, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Smith (2021) analyzed how Michigan State University (MSU) used Facebook as a tool in its image repair efforts after the Larry Nassar sex abuse scandal. The researchers looked at the image repair approach used by MSU during Nassar's hearing and in the immediate aftermath, while also looking at users' responses via Facebook comments to examine public reactions. By and large, comments posted indicated that individuals did not appear to buy into MSU's image repair. While MSU used tactics such as *bolstering*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*, the researchers again reiterated the necessity of using *mortification* and *corrective action* if an organization wants engagement on social media. In line with this assertion, the *mortification* post and the *corrective action* post relating to MSU's president resigning received the most likes, comments, and shares overall. The researchers also noted that not all engagement was positive; however, appearing apologetic seemed to matter to users.

Again, as previously demonstrated by image repair research related to sports crises, public relations, politics/government, and social media/celebrities, use of *mortification* and *corrective action* tends to increase the success of image repair efforts. Image repair research related to higher education crises further demonstrated that perceived believability and credibility, again, positively impacts the success of image repair attempts.

Conclusion

Scholars across a wide variety of fields, such as sports, public relations, politics and government, social media and celebrities, and higher education tended to see similar results in their analysis of crisis communication situations. *Mortification* and *corrective action* remained essential to success. However, success also required (and in some cases, only required) believability and credibility. With the knowledge gained from the literature reviewed above, it becomes both beneficial and appropriate to analyze the apologies issued during *Operation Varsity Blues* and gauge their success.

Higher Education – Admissions

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, *Operation Varsity Blues* shook the college admissions realm and caught national attention. It also created new material ripe for crisis communication analysis. Before a thorough discussion of individual apologies related to the *Operation Varsity Blues* scandal may proceed, a brief discussion of the college admissions process should be offered.

The college admissions process remains a daunting endeavor for many high school students and their families. In today's educational climate, having a college-going culture on high school campuses can be considered an essential part of college readiness efforts (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). A college-going culture prompts students to focus on preparing for college. Khan Academy (n.d.), a popular online educational tool, produced a step-by-step college admissions guide and timeline. This article serves as a reference tool for finding general advice and common expectations for how the process flows and how much work students should invest in the process. Between the freshman and senior years of high school, Khan Academy recommends that students take college preparatory courses, focus on

their grades, engage in extracurricular and leadership activities, find summer opportunities like internships, meet regularly with their guidance counselor, start saving for college, and apply for non-traditional scholarships.

Khan Academy (n.d.) also offers specific advice for specific years of high school. For instance, during the junior year of high school, students should take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT), take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT), research colleges, visit campuses, visit with representatives from an individual's desired colleges, search for traditional scholarships, take AP exams, find application deadlines, prepare for university interviews, draft application essays, prepare materials to assist teachers in writing letters of recommendation, and outline a financial aid plan. During the senior year of high school, students should take standardized tests again, revise application essays, ask for letters of recommendation, develop application materials, participate in early decision or early action admissions programs (if desired), submit applications, complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), send tax transcript if requested, receive decisions from colleges, compare financial packages from schools, and eventually place an enrollment deposit at the university of the student's choosing. These lists seem exhaustive, and, indeed, they remain fairly comprehensive. High school students, minors, are asked to begin preparing for college years ahead of time. They are encouraged to focus both their academic and non-academic efforts on the goal of entering college. This pressure may cause certain students to develop an unhealthy obsession with pursuing the vague idea of "college" and placing "college" as the only important goal in high school. Furthermore, this process places a distinct emphasis on preparing for *admission* to college rather than on preparation for *college*

itself. Whatever the case, the extensive process places tremendous pressure on families and young students.

Observations by researchers seem to support this conclusion. Harris (2019) explained that “[t]he college admissions process is a yearly source of stress and anxiety as students vie for acceptances from their top choices” (p. 1). For many students, the stress and anxiety associated with the college admissions process reach beyond healthy levels. Students at competitive high schools experience significant amounts of stress and sleep-deprivation, and depression and anxiety have dramatically increased in teenagers in the United States (Stegmeir, 2018). The behavior of universities further exacerbates this situation, with the Independent Educational Consultants Association noting that admissions criteria seem more and more opaque (IECA, 2021). Furthermore, access to college advising remains unequally distributed in the United States. In urban and rural public high schools, the average student-to-counselor ratio sits at 455:1 and reaches as high as 700:1, in some cases, often leaving school counselors feeling overburdened.

The combination of intense pressure, confusing processes, and limited resources creates a volatile situation. Students and families may look for a way to relieve pressure and find a sense of assurance. Harris (2019) argued that private consultants benefit in the current climate. Clients think that consultants’ services will quell anxiety and simplify the process. These explanations provide: (1) an understanding for how schemes of the magnitude of those in *Operation Varsity Blues* could develop, (2) plausible reasoning for why parents and students might attempt to skirt the system, and (3) enlightenment as to how private consultants, as well as collegiate faculty and staff, could take advantage of families.

Operation Varsity Blues – A College Admissions Scandal

On March 12, 2019, federal authorities held a press conference for the purpose of announcing charges (CNN, 2019) in what they deemed “the largest college admissions scam ever prosecuted by the Department of Justice” (NBC 6 South Florida, 2019). These authorities named the effort *Operation Varsity Blues* and described an investigation that involved millions of dollars, hundreds of special agents, and even well-known celebrities (CNN, 2019). The investigative efforts revealed that more than 50 parents, test administrators, and coaches participated in the scandal (Pascus, 2019). The scandal, which the District of Massachusetts’s United States Attorney’s Office referred to as “a nationwide conspiracy” (United States Attorney’s Office District of Massachusetts, 2021, p.1), exposed two schemes: standardized test cheating and college acceptance bribery. The first scheme, standardized test cheating, implicated the operations of William Singer (Pascus, 2019). Singer operated *The Key* and *The Key World Foundation*, a college admissions business and its non-profit counterpart. The second scheme, admitting students to elite universities under false pretenses of athletic recruitment (United States Attorney’s Office District of Massachusetts, 2021), involved the efforts of individuals like Michael Center, the former men’s tennis coach at the University of Texas (Axios, 2020). Both schemes involved the parents of students (Pascus, 2019), although prosecutors stated that many of the students remained unaware of their parents’ actions (CBS News, 2019). Because of the significant number of individuals involved in *Operation Varsity Blues* and the complexity of the scandal, two tables are provided below. The first table, *Table 1*, provides a detailed timeline of the scandal. This information comes from a timeline that Axios (2020) compiled, last updated August 21 (as of this writing), 2020. The second table, *Table 2*, provides a detailed

record of the individuals charged in connection with *Operation Varsity Blues*. This information comes from a chart that the District of Massachusetts's United States Attorney's Office (United States Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, 2021) compiled, last updated May 13, 2021 (as of this writing). Because the fallout connected with *Operation Varsity Blues* is technically ongoing, more information will likely become available in the future.

Table 1

Timeline

Date	Event
2019	
March 12	Federal prosecutors charge at least 50 people in connection with <i>Operation Varsity Blues</i> . Rick Singer pleads guilty to four charges.
March 19	The University of Southern California (USC) states that students who may be connected to the scandal will not be allowed to register for classes or receive transcripts while USC's investigation continues.
March 25	Twelve defendants plead not guilty. The U.S. Department of Education tells the presidents of eight schools that they are under investigation. Yale rescinds an offer of admissions to a student connected with <i>Operation Varsity Blues</i> .
March 28	Lawmakers in California introduce measures to increase the difficulty of (1) student athletes, (2) children of alumni, and (3) children of donors receiving preferential admissions to state universities. Michael Center appears for a charge and does not enter a plea.
March 29	15 people appear in federal court. Many parents do not speak up, and several lawyers choose not to comment.

Table 1 Continued

Date	Event
2019	
April 3	Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin appear in court.
April 4	Harvard launches an official probe, aimed at its fencing coach.
April 8	Federal prosecutors announce that Huffman, Center, and twelve other parents have agreed to plead guilty.
April 9	Loughlin and her husband, plus fourteen other parents, are indicted for conspiring to commit fraud and money laundering. Netflix tells the AP that it plans to delay the release of Huffman's forthcoming comedy.
April 12	Mark Riddell pleads guilty.
April 15	Loughlin and her husband plead not guilty.
April 24	Center pleads guilty to accepting \$100,000 bribe.
May 1	More families are implicated in the scandal, though it remains unclear how many.
May 13	Huffman pleads guilty.

Table 1 Continued

Date	Event
2019	
May 15	Georgetown expels two students involved in the scandal.
September 18	Prosecutors charge a Chinese national, accusing her of paying \$400,000 to enroll her son at UCLA under the guise of playing soccer.
October 15	Huffman reports to a federal prison to begin her prison sentence.
October 22	A grand jury in Boston indicts eleven parents who had not pled guilty at the time. These parents include Loughlin and her husband.
2020	
May 21	Loughlin and her husband agree to plea guilty.
August 21	A federal judge accepts the sentencing deal for Loughlin and her husband.

Adapted from: Axios (2020)

Table 2

Record of Individuals

Defendant	Charges	Case Status	Sentence Government Recommended	Sentence Court Imposed
Gregory Abbott	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud	10/8/2019 – Defendant sentenced. 5/22/2019 – Defendant pled guilty.	8 months in prison 1 year of supervised release Fine of \$40,000	1 month in prison 1 year of supervised release 250 hours of community service Fine of \$45,000
Marcia Abbott	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud	10/8/2019 – Defendant sentenced. 5/22/2019 – Defendant pled guilty.	8 months in prison 1 year of supervised release Fine of \$40,000	1 month in prison 1 year of supervised release 250 hours of community service Fine of \$45,000
Jane Buckingham	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud	10/23/2019 – Defendant sentenced. 5/24/2019 – Defendant pled guilty.	6 months in prison 1 year of supervised release Fine of \$40,000	3 weeks in prison 1 year of supervised release Fine of \$40,000
Michael Center	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud	2/24/2020 – Defendant sentenced. 4/24/2019 – Defendant pled guilty.	6 months in prison 1 year of supervised release Fine of \$20,00 Forfeiture of \$60,000	6 months in prison 1 year of supervised release Forfeiture of \$60,000

Table 2 Continued

Defendant	Charges	Case Status	Sentence Government Recommended	Sentence Court Imposed
Mossimo Giannulli	Conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud and honest services mail and wire fraud	8/21/2020 - Defendant sentenced.	5 months in prison	5 months in prison
		5/22/2020 - Defendant pled guilty.	2 years of supervised release	2 years of supervised release
			Fine of \$250,000	Fine of \$250,000
			250 hours of community service	250 hours of community service
Felicity Huffman	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud	9/13/2019 – Defendant sentenced.	1 month in prison	14 days in prison
		5/13/2019 – Defendant pled guilty.	1 year of supervised release	1 year of supervised release
			Fine of \$20,000	250 hours of community service
				Fine of \$30,000
Agustin Huneus Jr.	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud	10/4/2019 – Defendant sentenced.	15 months in prison	5 months in prison
		5/21/2019 – Defendant pled guilty.	1 year of supervised release	2 years of supervised release
			Fine of \$95,000	500 hours of community service
				Fine of \$100,000
Lori Loughlin	Conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud	8/21/2020 - Defendant sentenced.	2 months in prison	2 months in prison
		5/22/2020 - Defendant pled guilty.	2 years of supervised release	2 years of supervised release
			Fine of \$150,000	Fine of \$150,000
			100 hours of community service	100 hours of community service

Table 2 Continued

Defendant	Charges	Case Status	Sentence Government Recommended	Sentence Court Imposed
Mark Riddell	Conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud; conspiracy to commit money laundering	12/21/2021 - Sentencing hearing scheduled. 4/12/2019 - Defendant pled guilty.	Incarceration at the low end of the Guidelines sentencing range 3 years of supervised release Fine, forfeiture and restitution	
William Rick Singer	Racketeering conspiracy; money laundering conspiracy; conspiracy to defraud US; obstruction of justice	3/12/2019 - Defendant pled guilty and agreed to cooperate with the government's investigation. No sentencing hearing scheduled at this time.	Incarceration at the low end of the Guidelines sentencing range 3 years of supervised release Fine and forfeiture	

Adapted from: United States Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, 2021, p. 1-4, 7, 15, 17

Conclusion

Operation Varsity Blues gives the researcher the ability to expand crisis communication knowledge and literature by analyzing the apologies issued by various individuals involved in the scandal using Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory. This analysis will be instrumental in determining the apology types used and gauging whether an individual's effort was successful. Additionally, the scandal provides an opportunity to review the college admission process and determine whether the effects of *Operation Varsity Blues* influenced any changes in the existing process. As such, to explore these areas more fully, the following research questions guided the researcher:

RQ1: What strategies from Image Repair Theory are contained in the individuals' apologies?

RQ2: Did use of these strategies successfully repair the individuals' public images?

RQ3: Did *Operation Varsity Blues* alter the college admissions process in meaningful and substantial ways?

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this thesis takes a three-pronged approach to answering the research questions provided above. The first prong, an internal perspective, focuses on developing an understanding of Benoit's Image Repair Theory through a careful review of the theory. The second prong, an external perspective, focuses on developing an understanding of how scholars have previously used Benoit's theory in the context of various, interdisciplinary fields, including sports, public relations, politics/government, social media/celebrities, and higher education. It also includes analysis of the current college admissions environment and identification of factors that could allow for schemes like those uncovered in the *Operation Varsity Blues* investigation. The second prong is fulfilled through a review of extant literature regarding image repair in various contexts and regarding the current college admissions environment. The final prong, an interdependent perspective, utilizes the information gained from the first two methods to guide the methodology used to analyze apologies from individuals involved in *Operation Varsity Blues*.

Procedure

To answer RQ1, the researcher searched for publicly available copies of three individuals' apologies. Each apology was analyzed using the typology of Benoit's (1997) Image Repair as the lens for analysis. The researcher examined each apology line-by-line to identify which, if any, of Benoit's fourteen strategies appeared in the apologies. Specifically, the analysis included apologies from Huffman (Bryant, 2019), Huneeus (Woodrow, 2019), and Riddell (Richer & Binkley, 2019). To answer RQ2, the researcher developed an understanding of the individuals' public images by using publicly available information regarding the individuals' (1) employment before and after the apology and (2) social

perception before and after the apology. The researcher used this information about employment and social perception to determine if and/or how the individuals' public images improved after their apologies. Finally, to answer RQ3, the researcher looked at (1) university-specific actions and (2) industry actions to determine if and/or how the college admissions process in the United States changed in response to the *Operation Varsity Blues* scandal.

Therefore, after (1) determining strategies used, (2) comparing individuals' approaches, (3) considering public reactions to individuals' apologies, (4) examining university responses, and (5) observing responses from the broader field of higher education, the thesis engages in a Discussion section. The Discussion section further considers the image repair strategies that the apologies included, if or how those strategies successfully repaired the individuals' images, how the strategies impacted public opinion about the individuals, and if *Operation Varsity Blues* resulted in any meaningful, substantial changes to the college admissions process.

RESULTS

The researcher considered apologies from three different individuals. The first individual, Felicity Huffman, represented both a parent and a celebrity who was involved directly in *Operation Varsity Blues*. The second individual, Agustin Huneeus Jr., represented a parent who was involved directly in *Operation Varsity Blues*. The third individual, Mark Riddell, represented a non-parent who was involved directly in *Operation Varsity Blues*. The researcher used publicly available copies of the individuals' apologies.

Research Question One

Huffman

Felicity Huffman was accused of paying the *Key Worldwide Foundation* to participate in *Operation Varsity Blues*, which may have been the reason for her daughter scoring 400 points higher on her SAT than her PSAT (Pascus, 2019). A thorough analysis of Huffman's apology, which was included in Bryant's (2019) article, noted that she employed the strategies of *bolstering*, *minimization*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*. Huffman specifically used the strategy of *minimization* when she stated, "*My daughter knew absolutely nothing about my actions...*" (p. 3). In addition to the strategy of *minimization*, Huffman also employed the strategy of *bolstering*. Occurrence of this strategy can be seen when Huffman referenced her "*desire to help my daughter...*" (p. 3). Furthermore, Huffman employed the strategy of *corrective action*, explaining in two phrases, "*I am pleading guilty to the charge brought against me...*" and "*...will accept the consequences that stem from those actions*" (p. 3). Finally, Huffman used the strategy of *mortification*. She used this strategy many times, with words and phrases like, "*I am ashamed of the pain I have caused my daughter, my family, my friends, my colleagues, and the educational community,*" and "*...I want to*

apologize... to their parents who make tremendous sacrifices to support their children and do so honestly,” and “...no excuse to break the law or engage in dishonesty” (p. 3).

Huneus

Accusations against Agustin Huneus Jr. included bribing University of Southern California (USC) senior associate athletic director Donna Heinel and USC water polo coach Jovan Vavic, despite the fact that Huneus’s daughter did not actually play water polo (Woodrow, 2019), as well as paying \$50,000 to *Key Worldwide Foundation* (Pascus, 2019). A thorough analysis of Huneus’s apology, which is available through Woodrow’s (2019) article, using Benoit’s (1997) Image Repair Theory as a lens, indicated that Huneus employed the strategies of *bolstering*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*. Huneus specifically used the strategy of *bolstering* when he stated, “*My life has been devoted to my family and the people I have worked with and for,*” and “*While I wish I could go back and make different and better choices...*” (Woodrow, 2019, p. 3). In addition to the strategy of *bolstering*, Huneus also employed the strategy of *corrective action*. Occurrence of this strategy can be seen when Huneus said, “*Today’s plea was an important step in my effort to take responsibility and accept the consequences for acts that I deeply regret...*” (p. 3). Finally, Huneus also used the strategy of *mortification*. He used this strategy six times, employing words and phrases like, “*I am taking full responsibility for my wrongful actions,*” and “*I have disappointed them all and brought shame on myself and the people I love,*” and “*...I also apologize to students who work hard to get into college on their own merit...*” (p. 3).

Riddell

Mark Riddell, a private-school counselor, took exams for students or corrected answers after the students took the exams (United States Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, 2019). Riddell agreed to plead guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and money laundering (Pascus, 2019). Richer and Binkley's (2019) transcript of Riddell's apology in their article provided an opportunity to use Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory as a lens to analyze and note the strategies employed by Riddell. The analysis indicated that the strategies of *simple denial*, *bolstering*, and *mortification* were employed. Riddell specifically used the strategy of *simple denial* when he stated, "*I absolutely, unequivocally never bribed anyone...*" (p. 3). In addition to the strategy of *simple denial*, Riddell also engaged the strategy of *bolstering*. Occurrence of this strategy can be seen when Riddell said, "...*I also believe that the more than one thousand students I legitimately counseled... will paint a more complete picture of the person I truly am*" (p. 3). Finally, Riddell also used the strategy of *mortification*. His apology displayed this strategy with words and phrases like, "*I understand how my actions contributed to a loss of trust in the college admissions process,*" and "*I assume full responsibility...*" and "*I will always regret the choices I made...*" (p. 3).

General Trends

All three of the actors used *bolstering* (strengthening others' positive feelings about the actor and *mortification* (confessing and asking for forgiveness). Huneeus and Huffman did not use *simple denial* (claiming that an actor did not perform an action), while Riddell did. Huneeus and Riddell did not use *minimization* (attempting to minimize others' negative feelings about the action), while Huffman did. Riddell did not use *corrective action* (literally, taking action or speaking of taking action to correct the situation), while the other two did. In

general, all of the apologies contained similar strategies and similar themes. These data points are synthesized in *Table 3* below, for visual reference.

Table 3

Cross-Tabulation of Strategies Used by Individuals in Their Apologies

Strategy	Huffman	Huneus	Riddell
Simple Denial			X
Bolstering	X	X	X
Minimization	X		
Corrective Action	X	X	
Mortification	X	X	X

Research Question Two

RQ2 sought to answer whether the strategies employed by each individual were successful in mitigating for damages and repairing the individuals' images. According to Mehrotra (2021), Huneus received a lenient sentence for the role he played, because his daughter did not enroll at the intended school and because he only paid one-third of the money he promised to pay. The sentence was altered in Huneus's favor as he was allowed to serve under house arrest. Professionally, Huneus returned to his work as a vintner after serving his sentence, a profession he had before the scandal. Based on the information provided, Huneus's net worth did not appear to change. Therefore, it can be said that the

strategies employed by Huneeus were successful as his image appeared to not sustain permanent damage. Huneeus still owns his vineyard and several wine brands in the market.

According to Wagmeister (2020), Huffman made a similar, and even more noticeable, rebound after her role in *Operation Varsity Blues*. Huffman, known for her career on television, had much to lose after investigators uncovered her participation in the scheme. However, after serving her prison sentence, Huffman (1) signed on to a comedy show that was guaranteed a pilot production commitment from ABC and (2) received a significant amount of interest from Hollywood entities who wanted to work with her. One unnamed source close to Huffman stated, “From day one, she just wanted to do the right thing and that’s what she’s done...” (Wagmeister, 2020, p. 2). It can be said that the strategies employed by Huffman were successful because her public image in her industry did not suffer in the long-run. In fact, Huffman’s apology appeared believable, credible, and sincere.

According to Lachenal (2021), a webpage listing Riddell as the director of college entrance exam preparation for IMG Academy, a private school in Florida, was taken down after news about *Operation Varsity Blues* broke. Since revelations about the scandal became public, Riddell stepped out of the public eye, for the most part. He cooperated with the government’s investigation but publicly available information about his sentencing (which was scheduled for April 15, 2021) has not yet been made available. Based on the available information, the strategies used by Riddell cannot be said to be either successful or unsuccessful. Riddell’s career did not make an obvious rebound like Huneeus’s and Huffman’s, but that could be a result of Riddell choosing to remain outside the public sphere for the time being. More conclusive data about Riddell may surface after he serves his sentence and/or attempts to return to his previous career.

Research Question Three

RQ3 asked whether *Operation Varsity Blues* altered the college admissions process in meaningful and substantial ways. In the short term, clear and forceful measures were taken by universities to address the scandal. For instance, the University of Southern California (USC) stated that it would not allow students who might have been connected to the scandal to register for classes or receive transcripts while the university's investigation continued (Axios, 2020). Yale rescinded an offer of admission to a student, and Georgetown expelled two students (Axios, 2020). In the long term, however, experts argue that little has changed in the admissions process on a large scale (Reilly, 2020). One independent college counselor stated, "Any sort of changes that are being made now... are going to be a spit in the ocean." (Reilly, 2020, p. 2). This is because the environment and factors that enabled *Operation Varsity Blues* to occur still exist. While some corrective measures have been taken—for instance, some admissions officials will now consider if athletic recruits are actually athletically qualified (Reilly, 2020) and lawmakers in California introduced measures to increase the difficulty of student athletes, children of alumni, and children of donors receiving preferential admissions to state universities (Axios, 2020)—the basic college admissions environment has remained essentially the same. Use of SAT and ACT scores for determining financial aid (Reilly, 2020) incentivizes achieving high scores, perhaps even at dangerous costs. While cheating remains highly risky, it also remains highly rewarding, if successful, as evidenced by the families involved in *Operation Varsity Blues* whose children were admitted to prestigious or intended schools. Furthermore, prioritizing test scores still benefits wealthier families (Reilly, 2020) who may afford legitimate assistance or illegitimate assistance as in the case of *Operation Varsity Blues*. Additionally, as long as athletic

applicants still receive priority treatment, conditions favorable to bribery will still exist.

Parents may attempt to gain admittance for their children into certain universities by “cutting through red tape” by having their children fraudulently designated as athletic recruits, as *Operation Varsity Blues* demonstrated. Finally, none of the mentioned efforts that were taken to reduce bribery and cheating actually address the essential problem of the intense pressure levied on applicants and their families by the admissions process.

DISCUSSION

The apologies of three of the individuals involved in *Operation Varsity Blues*—Huffman, Huneeus, and Riddell—used similar strategies and achieved similar results. All of the apologies used *bolstering* and *mortification*. Huffman and Huneeus successfully repaired their images, while Riddell's efforts did not yield a conclusive result as to whether or not his image was successfully repaired.

Operation Varsity Blues did not seem to lead to meaningful, substantial changes in the college admissions process in the United States. On one hand, many universities did take specific, direct action to (1) respond to the scandal and/or (2) prevent the unethical events that took place at their universities from happening again (Axios, 2020). Furthermore, the state of California did enact legislation to attempt to prevent certain students from receiving preferential treatment (Axios, 2020). However, these positive results are outweighed by the fact that the essential environment, the conditions, that allowed *Operation Varsity Blues* to occur have not changed (Reilly, 2020).

Strategies

The findings remain consistent with previous research (Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick, & Thompson, 2020; Armfield, McGuire, Hoffman, Shin, Eckhart, Acquah-Baidoo, & Diaz, 2019; Frederick, Pegoraro, & Smith, 2021; Hanna & Morton, 2020; Lauzen, 2016; Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015; Moody, 2011; Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009; Riggs, 2019; Sarfo-Kantankah, 2019) based on a review of image repair discourse. Bolstering is intended to strengthen others' positive feelings about the actor (Benoit, 1997). The public nature of the *Operation Varsity Blues* scandal, the legal ramifications of the individuals' actions, and the social attention given to the crisis created an environment where the

individuals needed to (1) mitigate an enormous amount of negative feelings towards them and (2) salvage their chances of having a job after the fallout over the scandal. Thus, the researcher would expect these individuals to attempt to strengthen others' positive feelings about them. *Mortification* involves an actor confessing and asking for forgiveness. Again, the researcher would expect to see use of this strategy in this situation. Asking for forgiveness involves bringing others into the process of repairing an individual's image. The act of forgiving implies that someone else besides the actor will assist with bringing the actor back into the public's good graces; the actor creates group communication and opportunity for emotional cooperation by asking for forgiveness. In the case of *Operation Varsity Blues*, the crisis was significant enough that the actors could not repair their images on their own. Two of the actors also used *corrective action*, and one of them used *simple denial*. The researcher would not specifically expect to see *simple denial* used, but this observation does not remain completely unexpected. While a natural, human reaction to accusation may involve denying that an offense ever occurred or denying that an individual committed the occurring offense, in the case of *Operation Varsity Blues*, the evidence against the individuals appeared clear, convincing, and abundant.

Successful Image Repair

The difference between the clear, successful image repair efforts of two individuals (Huffman and Huneeus) contrasts sharply with the inconclusive results of the image repair efforts of the third individual (Riddell). Both Huffman and Huneeus used *bolstering*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*. Additionally, both Huffman and Huneeus experienced positive results of their efforts: Huneeus returned to his business, and Huffman had opportunity to return to her career. Neither experienced permanent social or political damage

to their image that prevented them from working in their industry. This observation remains consistent with image repair literature that suggests that *corrective action* and *mortification* remain the most important strategies for successful image repair. Furthermore, combining *bolstering*, *corrective action*, and *mortification* helped the individuals to appear believable and sincere. Image repair literature suggests that an individual's credibility may impact image repair efforts even more than the specific strategies used (Benoit, 1997). While Riddell's efforts appeared inconclusive in terms of successfully repairing the damage to his image, this could remain consistent with what the researcher would expect for three reasons. First, Riddell used only one of the two most important strategies for image repair: *mortification*, but not *corrective action*. Thus, because he failed to use all of the recommended strategies, Riddell could not necessarily expect to see as much successful repair. His image might be repaired, it might not be repaired, or it might be partially repaired. Second, because of his direct, hands-on involvement in helping parents rig the college admissions process in favor of their children, and because of his monetary gain as a result of participating in the scandal, others were more likely to not be understanding of his actions. While others might say, "I disagree with what these parents did, but it sounds like they were misguided in wanting to help their kids," they might not say the same of Riddell, opting for a position closer to, "He profited off of helping parents and their children to commit crimes." Third, because Riddell stepped back from the public eye, he has not given the public as much of a chance to help him repair his image. Thus, for all these reasons, the researcher might expect Riddell's image repair efforts to remain inconclusive in terms of success. *Simple denial*, based on a review of image repair research, does not appear helpful in repairing an individual's image. In cases noted in the literature review (Armfield, McGuire, Hoffman,

Shin, Eckhart, Acquah-Baidoo, & Diaz, 2019; Hanna & Morton, 2020; Lauzen, 2016; Moody, 2011; Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009), individuals similarly tended to combine *denial* with other less or moderately successful strategies. However, when they used *corrective action*, *mortification*, or achieved believability, they tended to see successful image repair. The researcher would expect to see use of *minimization* by parents, like Huffman, who were involved in *Operation Varsity Blues*, but who denied that their children were involved. Huffman's use of *minimization* did not focus on herself, but it instead focused on removing blame from her daughter, which makes sense in light of the severity of potential allegations against Huffman's daughter. Since Huffman remained believable and used *corrective action* and *mortification*, it is possible that these factors outweighed any potential negative effects of using *minimization*. Furthermore, using *minimization* potentially positively furthered Huffman's image repair effort, as it made her appear to be a misguided parent who wanted the best for her child.

College Admissions in the United States After *Operation Varsity Blues*

Overall, *Operation Varsity Blues* did not seem to lead to meaningful, substantial changes in the college admissions process in the United States. This conclusion remains so because the efforts of individual universities and the State of California did not change the conditions that allowed the *Operation Varsity Blues* scandal to occur. These conditions are three-fold: advantage to the wealthy, prioritization of athletic and legacy applicants, and level of pressure placed on families. First, the use of SAT/ACT scores by universities to determine financial aid awards may benefit families with wealth who can (1) afford a higher quality education, (2) afford better test preparation materials, (3) afford private college consulting, and/or (4) afford to participate in a scheme like *Operation Varsity Blues*. Families with the

financial resources to afford legitimate, or even illegitimate, counseling and test-prep services certainly benefit in this system. Indeed, availability of financial resources was a, if not *the*, predominant factor that contributed to *Operation Varsity Blues*: the families involved possessed the money to participate in the schemes. Second, many universities still favor legacy and athletic applicants. Families that can afford to donate large sums of money to universities can practically ensure that their children receive special consideration. By prioritizing athletic applicants, families are encouraged to have their children designated as athletic recruits, which creates an incentive (and a market) for *falsely* designating applicants as athletic recruits. (Research does indicate, however, that some universities have been prompted to consider *if* athletic recruits are athletically qualified, which represents a small step in the right direction for college admissions reform). Finally, the intense level of pressure placed on students and their families by the college admissions process may create a mindset of “achieve at all costs” and creates a place for private admissions counselors to take advantage of the system (Harris 2019). Therefore, because it did not change the basic conditions that allowed the scandal to flourish, *Operation Varsity Blues* did not create meaningful, substantial changes in the college admissions process in the United States. To the contrary, the process continues to encourage students to *not* compete with each other on “their own merit” (Woodrow, 2019, p. 3).

The natural question resulting from this conclusion is: If students are not competing on their own merit, what are they competing on the basis of? The answer to this question begins with consideration of what *merit* is, exactly, in the first place. Research and commentary from the field of higher education sheds light on this issue.

Hermanowicz (2019) suggested that, “Merit is established by demonstrated performance” (p. 343). Hermanowicz (2019) argued, however, that merit plays an insignificant role in contemporary higher education. According to Hermanowicz (2019), much of higher education operates apart from merit, and the small sector that does use merit employs only a politicized and corrupted version of merit, leading to the ultimate conclusion that, “*Merit* in U.S. higher education has lost meaning” (Hermanowicz, 2019, p. 343). The “demeritization” of merit begins before college and results from grade inflation, exaggerated letters of recommendation, and mismatching students with universities (Hermanowicz, 2019). Thus, the concept of merit becomes practically useless and hopelessly vague for elite universities today. Furthermore, the idea of merit is undermined by bad educational practices before college. It should be of little wonder that students do not compete on their own merit, if merit fails to mean anything significant.

Lorbeer (2020) took Hermanowicz’s (2019) conclusion a step further. Lorbeer (2020) argued that while elite schools do use a meritorious system, most admitted applicants come from well-off families. Legacy preferences run rampant at certain universities. *Operation Varsity Blues*, according to Lorbeer (2020), made it appear as though, between highly competitive schools, meritocracy remained flawed. However, on the contrary, elite schools do identify well-deserving students through a meritorious system; it is the clear preference shown for legacy applicants that discourages other applicants. *Operation Varsity Blues* “revealed... a college admission process ripe for abuse by non-legacy parents fearful of an unsecured financial future for their children” (Lorbeer, 2020, p. 8). In other words, many students participating in the college admissions process in the United States today do not compete on their own merit, they compete on the merit of the wealth of their parents. Even

schools who use “merit” turn their admissions policies towards favoring wealthy applicants. (This phenomenon is not new in the United States. Ornstein (2019) noted that Harvard and Yale universities, institutions originally intended to serve religious purposes, quickly became institutions that served the children of the wealthy—preserving privilege, rank, and status).

Students from historically excluded groups do not experience the same amount of success in higher education as their peers (Glater, 2018). These students lag in terms of matriculation and graduation rates. Furthermore, they often take on amounts of debt that harm their educational experiences and subsequent careers. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are well-situated in the American system of college admissions, while students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not.

Giancola and Kahlenberg (2016) summarized the state of college admissions well in their writing for the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation:

“The admissions process used today in America’s most selective colleges and universities is a classic case of interest group politics gone awry. Athletic coaches lobby for athletes. Trustees advocate for students who are the children of potential donors. Faculty members lobby for the children of other faculty and for high scoring students, who tend to be wealthy. And nobody champions or fights for smart, low-income students” (p. 1).

Fundamentally, universities were not held accountable for their participation in *Operation Varsity Blues*. These universities did not fix the problems that led to the scandal and continue to operate in a manner that rewards competition on the basis of wealth.

Lessons Learned

Thorough analysis of apologies from three individuals involved in *Operation Varsity Blues* yielded results that align with previous image repair research and discourse: (1) *mortification* and *corrective action* correlate with successful image repair, but (2) believability also plays a role in delivery of an effective apology. Practitioners wanting to perform successful image repair should keep these two findings in mind. While the researcher's image repair analysis delivered conclusive results, considering the broader impact of *Operation Varsity Blues* delivered far less reassuring findings.

Reforming the college admissions process in the United States will require much time and will involve additional research beyond the scope of this thesis. However, this research suggests that (1) hyper-rewarding wealth in the college admissions process, (2) focusing on preparation for admission to college and not on preparation for college itself, and (3) creating an intensely stressful college admissions environment that incentivizes desired outcomes more than ethical behavior fosters conditions ripe for cheating and bribery. Successful college admissions reform initiatives should focus on the root causes of *Operation Varsity Blues* and not just the visible fruit of this root (cheating and bribery).

Limitations

Due to the ongoing nature of this scandal, it is possible that new information may arise in the future that bolsters, changes, or nullifies this research, as it pertains to the apologies of the three individuals. Furthermore, because of the massive extent of the schemes and the many institutional, social, and individual reactions to the schemes, it may remain difficult for researchers to easily consolidate public opinion about these three individuals. Thus, the researcher chose to consider economic factors as essential to “image repair

success,” because these factors demonstrated if an individual’s image was repaired well enough for that individual to socially-acceptably return to society through work.

CONCLUSION

Operation Varsity Blues created an opportunity for new research to add to existing image repair literature and discourse. The scandal also prompted questions about the event's broader impact on the college admissions process. The researcher (1) used publicly available texts of individuals' apologies and analyzed these texts through the lens of Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory, (2) compared the strategies used in the apologies and evaluated the strategies' effectiveness, and (3) studied *Operation Varsity Blue*'s impact on the college admissions process in the United States. The researcher found that two individuals, Huffman and Huneeus—the first of whom used *mortification* and *corrective action* and who also most clearly delivered on believability, and the second of whom also used *mortification* and *corrective action*—experienced successful image repair. This finding remained consistent with prior image repair research. The individual who did not use both *mortification* and *corrective action* also did not deliver conclusive results in terms of image repair success. *Operation Varsity Blues*, as an event, did prompt responsive action from individual universities and the State of California, but it did not result in meaningful, substantial change in the college admissions process in the United States.

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BIOGRAPHY

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